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Prospects for Iranian Resistance to a Soviet Invasion

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An Intelligence Assessment

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*NESA 86-10047X
SOV 86-10059X
December 1986*

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An Intelligence Assessment

This paper was prepared by [] Office of
Near Eastern and South Asian Analysis, []
[], Office of Soviet Analysis.

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Comments and queries are welcome and may be
directed to the Chief, Persian Gulf Division,
NESA, [] or the Chief,
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**Prospects for
Iranian Resistance
to a Soviet Invasion**

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Scope Note

This paper assesses Iran's likely responses to a Soviet invasion, assuming that the Islamic regime continues to rule in Tehran and that Iran and Iraq continue at war. [] much of the paper is speculative and attempts to draw conclusions about how Tehran would fight the Soviets on the basis of Iran's performance and adaptability in the Iran-Iraq war. []

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A Soviet military move into Iran or elsewhere in the Persian Gulf region is unlikely in the near term. Nonetheless, Moscow has contingency plans for a range of combat actions against Iran while continuing to work toward establishing a pro-Soviet government in Tehran through nonmilitary means. This assessment does not consider in detail the conditions under which the Soviets would invade Iran, nor does it look at a Soviet campaign within the context of a Soviet-NATO war. Although we believe the Soviets would not plan to invade Iran without anticipating and preparing for US military intervention, our discussion is limited to the Iranian opposition the Soviets would face. This paper also briefly examines the probable Iranian reaction to US intervention in a Soviet-Iranian war. []

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**Prospects for
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Key Judgments

*Information available
as of 3 November 1986
was used in this report.*

A Soviet invasion of Iran appears highly unlikely. Nonetheless, an examination of such a scenario is prudent because of US interests and security commitments in the Persian Gulf region and because the Soviets continue to plan for a range of combat actions against Iran should circumstances necessitate a military move.

The scale of an Iranian campaign would far surpass anything the Soviets have attempted since World War II, and the Soviets probably would require more than a month to fully prepare their forces. A Soviet invasion force would probably reach the Persian Gulf in as little as three weeks once combat began. The full deployment and garrisoning of the occupation force throughout the country, however, might take several months.

In planning for such a campaign, the Soviets would almost certainly envision considerable risks and problems. These would include fierce Iranian resistance, the need to commit a large occupation force—probably 300,000 to 500,000 men—to contend with an anticipated Iranian guerrilla movement, the likely negative political response from other nations, especially those in the Persian Gulf, and the possibility of a direct military confrontation with the United States.

The Iranians do not believe a Soviet invasion is likely, and they might misjudge the seriousness of Soviet preparations to cross the border. If Moscow's forces were to invade, Tehran probably would have to rely on decade-old defense plans developed by the Shah's armed forces. Moreover, the demands of the Iran-Iraq war have almost exclusively driven Tehran's military planning for the last six years, limiting its capability to conduct exercises for the defense of Iran's northern border. Even if the war with Iraq were to end, Iran would still see Baghdad as its major adversary and would concentrate most of its forces to protect its western border.

Early warning of Soviet intentions to invade would significantly improve Iran's ability to prepare its defenses:

- Tehran would call up thousands of irregular and reserve forces and would try to block Soviet routes into the country.
- Iranian forces would prepare choke points to delay the Soviets and would destroy communications and power facilities, airfields, and, perhaps, oil installations to prevent Soviet use.
- Tehran would try to move some Army units to the north, but it probably would rely mostly on its Gendarmerie, Basij militia, and Revolutionary Guard forces in the area as a first line of defense.


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After defeat of their Army, the Iranians would conduct an extensive guerrilla campaign. With foreign arms assistance, particularly from the West, the Iranians might be able to prevent the Soviets from consolidating their control over Iran for many years. Even without aid, opposition would continue indefinitely because few Iranians would favor a government under Soviet domination.

Strong Iranian opposition to a Soviet invasion would slow a Soviet advance to the Persian Gulf and perhaps cause the Soviets to put off planning for a push beyond Iran. Tehran probably would accept offers of US military supplies, and the provision of materiel might strengthen Iranian resistance. Direct US intervention to assist the Iranians during a Soviet invasion, however, would be viewed by Tehran as evidence of collusion by the superpowers to divide Iran. As with the Soviets, the Iranians most likely would force US troops to fight a war of attrition.



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Prospects for Iranian Resistance to a Soviet Invasion

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The Islamic revolution and the Iran-Iraq war have significantly altered Iran's capability to resist a Soviet invasion. Before 1979, Iranian defense planning focused mostly on the threat of a Soviet rather than an Iraqi attack. Virtually all of Iran's resources now are devoted to fighting Iraq, and Tehran probably will continue to view Baghdad as its primary adversary even after the war ends. If the Soviets were to invade, Iran probably would be taken offguard and would rely initially on pre-Khomeini defense strategies to resist the attack.

Soviet Military Planning Considerations

The Soviets could conduct a variety of military campaigns against Iran. Because Soviet planners leave little to risk, they are conservative in assessing force requirements and thorough in planning and preparing for military operations. For this reason, we judge that the Soviets assume that Iranian resistance would be sufficient to prevent an easy victory and would therefore plan for an intensive campaign against determined opposition.

In scope and complexity, a general invasion of Iran would far surpass anything the Soviets have attempted since World War II. The forces required would be quite large—on the order of one or more fronts with six ground armies totaling between 20 and 25 divisions with associated tactical air support. In addition, they also would have to consider deploying additional ships and submarines to the Indian Ocean and moving strike aircraft to bases in the southern USSR.

We believe that the USSR has sufficient units of its Ground Forces and tactical elements of its Air Forces stationed in its Southern Theater of Military Operations (TMO) to conduct a general offensive into Iran with the objective of advancing to the Persian Gulf and occupying the country.¹ The Soviets almost certainly would mobilize all units in the Transcaucasus, North Caucasus, and Turkestan Military Districts

The Soviet Perspective

The USSR's long-term objective in Iran is the establishment of a pro-Soviet government. The Soviets almost certainly would prefer to achieve this goal without resorting to arms. We believe Moscow will continue to focus on ensuring Tehran's continued anti-US orientation and strive to promote better Soviet-Iranian relations despite its marked lack of success in this area.

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Nonetheless, there are circumstances under which the Soviets would consider military action against Iran. These circumstances could include:

- The introduction of US military forces into Iran or the perception by Moscow that the United States was about to do so.*
- The rise to power in Iran of a pro-Soviet faction that "requested" Soviet assistance to solidify or sustain its rule.*
- The eruption of civil war in Iran following the death or fall from power of Ayatollah Khomeini, plunging the country into prolonged political chaos.*
- The initiation of a Warsaw Pact-NATO or Soviet-Chinese war and subsequent expansion of military operations to include Iranian territory.*

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A sudden event, such as an abrupt end of the Khomeini regime, could prompt the Soviets to intervene in Iran, but we believe any military move would be preceded by drawn-out deliberations within the Soviet political and military leadership. We judge that the Soviets would act militarily only if they were convinced that nonmilitary measures had proved fruitless or were assessed as unlikely to succeed.

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Table 1
Soviet Ground Forces Equipment Opposite Iran

	Tanks	Artillery	APCs/IFVs ^a
Transcaucasus, North Caucasus, and Turkestan MDs ^b	5,400	5,200	7,900
Central Asian MD	2,200	2,100	1,800

^a Armored personnel carriers/infantry fighting vehicles.

(MDs). In addition, to ensure the availability of reinforcements, we believe at least a partial mobilization would be conducted in the Central Asian MD and in the MDs in the central USSR. The logistic structure of the Southern TMO would have to be expanded considerably to support frontal operations.

If a decision to move militarily were made by Moscow, detailed plans developed beforehand would be available to Soviet commanders. During peacetime, the Soviets continually develop and refine wartime planning against potential opponents, and we believe they have fully established plans for a range of combat actions against Iran involving their Ground and Air Forces and Navy.

Soviet Command and Force Structure Opposite Iran

Theater High Command

The Soviets have established a High Command of Forces for the Southern TMO to direct and coordinate preparations for possible war against Iran. The command is in daily contact with the forces within the theater and is responsible for developing war plans and supervising training and exercises. As a result, it would operate more efficiently from the outset of war than if the command structure was activated only shortly before hostilities began.

Ground Force Structure and Mobilization

The Soviets have 24 motorized rifle divisions and one tank division stationed in the Transcaucasus, North Caucasus, and Turkestan Military Districts as part of the Southern TMO. One airborne division, one air assault brigade, and one airmobile brigade also are available for use in operations against Iran (see foldout at the end of the report). Support for airborne and air assault operations would come from the Soviets' fleet of fixed-wing transport aircraft as well as the nearly 500 helicopters available in the Southern TMO. In addition, nondivisional artillery, air defense, and miscellaneous combat support and service support units stationed in these MDs probably would participate in a campaign.

With the exception of units in Afghanistan, components of the Soviet Ground Forces opposite Iran are maintained at low readiness. Most units in the Transcaucasus, North Caucasus, and Turkestan districts, as well as those in adjacent MDs, are manned at one-fourth or less of war-authorized strength. This low level of peacetime manning restricts most unit training to company-level and below.

Before invading Iran, Soviet forces would have to undergo large-scale mobilization, which would entail the callup of several hundred thousand reservists.

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Table 2
Soviet Aircraft Opposite Iran

	Fighters	Ground Attack	Reconnaissance
Transcaucasus, North Caucasus, and Turkestan MDs ^a	200	500	100
Central Asian MD	150	120	60
Tashkent and Tbilisi Air Defense Districts ^b	200		

^a Figures denote combat aircraft in operational units. There are no Air Force units in the North Caucasus Military District.

^b These aircraft are intended for the strategic air defense of the Southern Theater of Military Operations.

[REDACTED]

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Depending on the unit's peacetime readiness, mobilization time for divisions would range from one to two weeks. All but a small percentage of the equipment assigned to these units is kept in storage in peacetime and would require some preparation before becoming ready for combat. In addition, some of the lowest strength divisions lack their full complement of combat equipment, and the acquisition of necessary weapons and support equipment could lengthen their mobilization times. [REDACTED]

units and converting fighter regiments to ground attack units. They now have over 560 such aircraft in the Southern TMO. Two air armies controlled by the Supreme High Command also could be employed for deep strikes by the longer range aircraft assigned to these units. [REDACTED]

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We believe that the amount of time required by the Ground Forces to complete personnel mobilization, equipment preparation, and postmobilization refresher training would be approximately one month to six weeks. Postmobilization training probably would be directed at developing battalion tactical skills because Soviet planning is based heavily on the success of these combat units in carrying out assigned missions. This training would probably take from three to four weeks. [REDACTED]

The Soviet Indian Ocean Squadron would play a limited role in a general invasion of Iran, and its operations would be largely restricted to preventing the delivery of supplies through Iranian ports and assisting the Soviet Ground Forces in capturing the port cities. The squadron includes one general purpose submarine, four or five surface combatants, and 16 to 18 naval auxiliaries. Some augmentation could come from the Soviet Pacific Fleet, but a substantial enlargement would strain the logistic system of the squadron. Access to an Iranian port would alleviate the logistic burden, but the capture and use of port facilities could occur only during the latter stages of a campaign. The Caspian Sea Fleet also could play a limited role in supplying Soviet forces and staging small-scale amphibious assaults on Iran's coast. [REDACTED]

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Air and Naval Structure and Mobilization

Air support for operations into Iran would come from tactical air regiments in the Transcaucasus, Turkestan, and Central Asian MDs, which have a total of 1,300 combat aircraft. The North Caucasus Military District contains several military aviation schools, but it does not have any combat-ready units. The Soviets have been increasing the number of ground attack aircraft in the theater since 1980 by creating new

Soviet air and naval units that would be used in operations against Iran are kept at a higher state of combat readiness than those of the Ground Forces in the Southern TMO. They thus require less mobilization and preparation before engaging in offensive

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operations. Redeployment of these units to support a full invasion of Iran could require up to a week, but this is well within the time required by the Ground Forces to prepare for such an operation. []

Forces in Afghanistan

The Soviets have major elements of three motorized rifle divisions and one airborne division, along with other combat support units, in Afghanistan as part of the 40th Army. Aviation assets, including helicopter and fixed-wing aircraft, also are stationed in Afghanistan as part of this army. As presently constituted and positioned, these forces are fully committed to combat operations in country, although the Soviets could use Afghanistan as a jumping-off point for operations into Iranian Baluchistan. It is unclear whether the Soviets would consider such operations as part of their invasion planning, or whether they would be willing to divert forces from their primary mission in Afghanistan. []

Force Sustainability

We judge that the Soviets would require 20 to 25 divisions to undertake a general invasion of Iran. To ready such a force for operations and support it once operations commenced, the logistic structure of the Southern TMO would have to be expanded considerably from its peacetime configuration. We assess that sufficient stocks of ammunition are available in this theater to sustain Soviet forces for at least two months of combat operations. Fuel supplies are not so plentiful, but we believe that a sufficient amount is stored in the theater to support at least the opening phase of combat. []

The major weakness in the logistic infrastructure is the lack of adequate lift and transport capability for moving supplies. Thousands of trucks would have to be requisitioned from the civilian economy for military use. Other facilities and units that are essential to meet wartime requirements such as medical treatment, vehicle repair, and maintenance of wartime supply routes are also seriously lacking. Although land transportation routes in the Southern TMO are few in number, virtually all supplies would be moved by the road and rail network. []

Soviet Campaign To Invade and Occupy Iran

To ensure continuous logistic and air support, we believe that a Soviet general invasion of Iran would be conducted in phases.² During the initial phase, units of the Ground Forces—supported by tactical elements of the Air Forces operating out of bases in the Soviet Union and Afghanistan—would attack in order to seize northwestern, central, and northeastern Iran, including Tehran. After a short pause to consolidate their position, resupply units, replenish and move forward their logistic stocks, and redeploy tactical aircraft to captured airfields, the Soviets would initiate the second phase of the campaign—a drive to the Persian Gulf to seize the Khuzestan oilfields and the Strait of Hormuz. []

The amount of time the Soviets would require to overcome the Iranian military once combat commenced would probably range from several weeks to several months. The length of time would depend on the intensity, durability, and effectiveness of Iranian resistance as well as on terrain and weather conditions. The Soviets could seize the border regions of Iran relatively quickly and, after securing this area, might attempt to advance on one or two narrow axes toward ports on the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman. The success of these largely self-sustaining “flying columns” would depend on their ability to advance quickly, penetrate Iranian resistance before it solidified, and capture and hold a port until an overland linkup with the rest of the Soviet army could be achieved. The port could be used by the Soviet Navy to provide assistance, and its seizure would prevent the Iranians or other nations from using it in resisting the Soviet attack. The columns would not attempt to hold ground in the interior of Iran, which would be the objective of the more broadly based advance by the bulk of the Soviet forces. []

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A complete occupation of Iran could take up to several months. The difficulties encountered in achieving this objective would be the rugged terrain, the lack of adequate north-south and east-west axes of traverse, the lack of existing garrison facilities to cover large areas, and the need to secure lengthy and vulnerable lines of communication to support the stationing of Soviet forces. []

Phase I

The initial attack into northwestern Iran probably would be made by about 10 divisions organized into two armies. The constrictive terrain would limit the number of forces the Soviets could commit to the opening attack. The main axis of advance probably would be the cities of Jolfa, Tabriz, and Zanjan, and it could be supported by airborne and airmobile operations to seize airfields and mountain passes in order to facilitate the advance. The Soviets might attempt small-scale amphibious landings along Iran's Caspian coast to assist the drive, but their Caspian Sea Fleet has only a limited capability to undertake such operations. Once more space was available for maneuver operations, the Soviets would commit additional troops to continue the advance. []

Another four or five divisions would attack northeastern and eastern Iran from Turkestan and Afghanistan moving on two axes—one westward toward Tehran and one southward toward the ports of Bandar-e Abbas and Bandar Beheshti. These forces would want to quickly seize the airfields at Zahedan and Kerman so that they could be used to support air operations during the subsequent advance to the Persian Gulf. []

The use of Afghanistan to stage major axes of advance into southeastern Iran, however, would present the Soviets with considerable logistic problems. The supply line of a force attacking from Zaranj would extend from its base in the USSR for almost 2,000 kilometers through hostile Afghan territory. In addition, the road network such a force would use between the Iranian-Afghan border and the Persian Gulf consists of a single road over 1,000 kilometers long that traverses mountains and desert. Nevertheless, Soviet forces at a minimum could stage spoiling attacks from Afghanistan to divert Iranian forces from the main axes of advance. []

Military Geography

Iran's terrain does not favor an invading army. Nearly four-fifths of the country is mountainous or covered with rugged hills. In Iran's mountain rim-land—the Zagros Mountains in the west and the Elburz Mountains in the northeast—Soviet wheeled and tracked vehicles would be limited mainly to travel on narrow valley floors. Cross-country movement would be easier for Soviet forces in the plains and basins in central Iran and along the borders with Afghanistan and Pakistan. Even so, they would have to contend with sand dunes, unstable sand, and miry salt flats in some areas. A prevailing northwestern wind also causes dust storms in the south that reduce visibility and sometimes cause equipment to fail. Flooding occurs sporadically in the spring and autumn in the area bordering the Caspian Sea and during the spring in Khuzestan. []

Terrain probably would increase the ability of the Iranians to delay the Soviets by providing them with defensive advantages during attacks and facilitating guerrilla operations. The Iranians would be less encumbered by heavy equipment than the Soviets and could move more quickly over difficult ground. Soviet armored vehicles would be restricted mostly to major roads. Rocky terrain would make airmobile insertions more difficult for the Soviets. Lightly armed Iranian infantry or guerrilla forces in some areas might be able to use this terrain to conduct enfilading attacks against columns. []

Iran's road network would quickly deteriorate under sustained use by Soviet armored vehicles. Less than a quarter of the country's 85,000 kilometers of roads are hardsurfaced. [] even main routes are in poor repair because of Iran's focus on its war with Iraq. This would hinder the Soviets' ability to make high-speed advances using the road network. []

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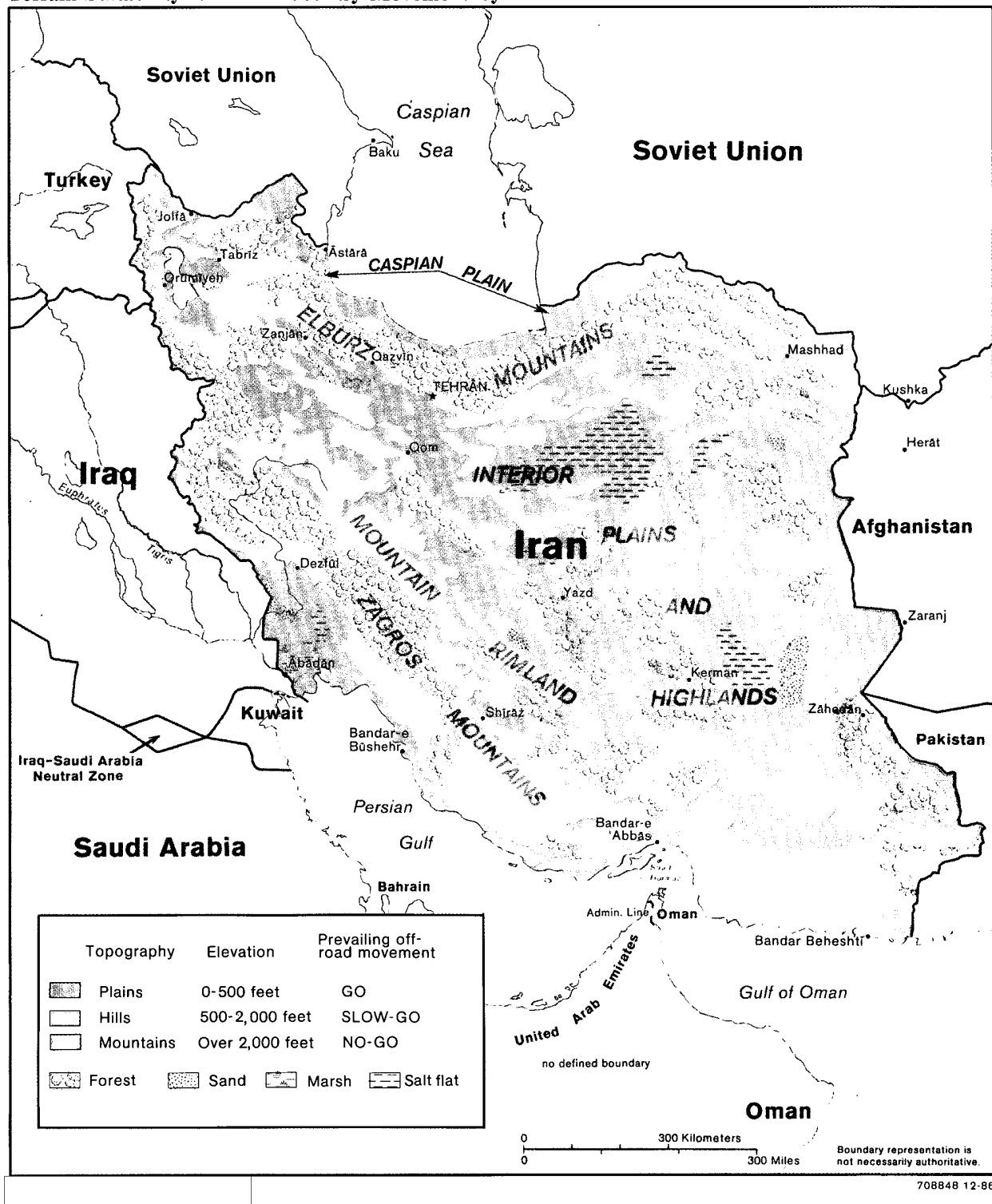
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Figure 2
Terrain Suitability for Cross-Country Movement by Wheeled and Tracked Vehicles



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Phase II

After Phase I, the Soviets probably would commit the remainder of their invasion force and continue the attack to seize the Khuzestan oilfields and ports on the Persian Gulf and Gulf of Oman. As part of this phase of their operation, they might conduct an airborne assault in order to seize certain key oil facilities in the Gulf region. The Soviets probably would undertake airborne assaults when they were in a position to provide air support and could conduct a quick linkup overland, especially if these assaults were coordinated with the advance of "flying columns" to quickly seize important, distant objectives. []

Rate of Advance

During a full-scale invasion, problems associated with moving through rugged terrain would be magnified as the forces moved deeper into Iran passing through choke points and further extending lines of communication. Because of the limited road and rail network in Iran, the Soviets would have difficulties in supplying a large invasion force overland, and, until airfields had been captured, resupply by air would be limited to what could be accomplished by helicopter and parachute drops. The Soviets would use the Caspian ports for resupply to the maximum extent possible but would still be confronted with the problem of moving supplies inland from the coast. []

The rate of advance would benefit greatly from the virtually complete mastery of the air that the Soviets would hold throughout the campaign. Before the initiation of the ground attack, the Soviets would probably conduct a large-scale air operation to destroy Iranian aircraft on the ground, attack command installations, and inflict casualties on troop concentrations. The Air Forces would then support the Ground Forces' advance by providing close air support to units in combat, attacking Iranian defensive positions, and preventing Iranian aircraft not destroyed in the initial air offensive from attacking Soviet forces. Fighters and fighter-bombers could conduct specific ground support attacks, while light bombers could undertake missions deep into Iranian territory. []

Limited Invasion Scenario:**A Soviet Attack To Seize Azerbaijan**

We believe the Soviets could occupy Azerbaijan in northwestern Iran within three weeks. Such an invasion probably would initially require only five to seven divisions. These units could be assembled entirely from forces already present in the Transcaucasus MD, and the smaller invasion force would reduce Soviet mobilization and logistic requirements. Soviet Ground Forces also would be within range of supporting tactical components of their Air Forces stationed in the USSR. []

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Nonetheless, a limited invasion of Iran to seize Azerbaijan would meet fierce Iranian opposition. Tehran would mobilize much of its military and many volunteers, believing that Moscow would be dissatisfied with taking only a small amount of territory. We believe that resistance by guerrillas and conventional armed forces would be sufficient to force the Soviets to expand their commitment to hold the territory. []

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Offers of autonomy and land by Moscow to tribes in northwestern Iran might induce a few groups to tacitly support a Soviet invasion. A small number of Marxist Kurds would probably even cooperate with the Soviets. We believe that the overwhelming majority of the population in the north, however, would strongly resist an invasion. []

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Iranian Plans and Preparations

We believe that the Iranians—with history as a teacher—are wary of a superpower plot to seize strategic territory.³ Nonetheless, the demands of the Iran-Iraq war have limited Tehran's ability to plan for and conduct exercises for the protection of the country's northern borders. []

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³ In August 1941 British and Soviet forces simultaneously invaded Iran and subdued most resistance after about three days. []

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Figure 3
Limited Soviet Invasion to Seize Iranian Azerbaijan: Illustrative Campaign



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current regime, however, the Shah assumed that the United States would support Iran if the Soviets invaded. The defense plan called for holding the Soviets north of the Zagros Mountains until US forces could arrive. [REDACTED]

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Early Warning Shortcomings

We believe that there is a better-than-even chance that Tehran would ignore or discount invasion indicators. Political tensions most likely would increase before a Soviet military move, but Tehran probably would believe that Moscow would not invade. The Iranians might view Soviet actions merely as political brinkmanship and assess military preparations as part of Soviet exercise activity. Because they would continue to see Iraq as the greater threat, the Iranians probably would be reluctant to redeploy Army forces from the western front even if the war with Iraq had ended. Tehran quite likely would interpret a warning from the United States as an attempt to divert Iranian forces northward in preparation for a US attack from the south. [REDACTED]

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The initial conventional response of the Iranians would rely partly on plans developed before the revolution to defend against a Soviet invasion.⁴ The Shah's military strategy aimed at delaying a Soviet advance as long as possible. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] Iranian forces practiced setting demolition charges to block the main passes along the Soviet border. Tribal groups and the Gendarmerie, armed with light weapons and given limited paramilitary training, were supposed to conduct harassing attacks against the Soviets and were responsible for implementing civil defense plans in the north, [REDACTED]

The Shah's forces believed that they could use choke points and strongholds—including Kermanshah (now Bakhtaran), Dezful, Qazvin, and Hamadan, where some Army units are headquartered, and roads connecting the cities—to delay Soviet forces indefinitely.

[REDACTED] the Shah's forces also expected that they would have to defend airfields against Soviet airborne and special-purpose forces. The Iranian Navy was prepared to attack Soviet surface combatants and submarines to prevent them from closing the Persian Gulf to shipping. Unlike the

Even if warned, the Iranians might be surprised by a Soviet invasion. We judge that the Iranians have a limited tactical ability to detect Soviet preparations to cross the border. According to a treaty signed by Iran and the USSR in the 1920s, their common border, except for naval facilities along the Caspian Sea, may not be fortified on the Iranian side within an 80-kilometer zone. The military authority in the Iranian zone responsible for protecting and observing the northern border is the Iranian Gendarmerie—probably with fewer than 10,000 men—whose detection

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⁴ Tehran might decide to retaliate against Moscow by launching terrorist attacks, even though such actions would not stop an invasion. Religious zealots would conduct suicide bombings of Soviet embassies and facilities around the world and assassinate Soviet diplomats and other important leaders. The Iranians might also use speedboats filled with explosives to launch suicide attacks on Soviet shipping. [REDACTED]

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The Basij: Iran's Mass Militia

The Basij (Mobilization of the Oppressed) is a reserve force composed mainly of young and illiterate volunteers from the lower and rural classes. Basij personnel—like members of the Revolutionary Guard, which recruits and leads them—are thoroughly indoctrinated by clerics into believing that they are fighting for Islam against the forces of evil. Because they have been used by the Revolutionary Guard as shock troops, their greatest contribution to the Iran-Iraq war has been their eagerness to become religious martyrs and absorb heavy casualties in place of more highly trained Iranian forces. The Basij could be expected to be as aggressive against the Soviets. []

Basij soldiers normally operate in squads armed with rifles, machineguns, RPGs, and other light weapons. Basij militiamen are attached to Army as well as Revolutionary Guard forces. Early in the war, Iraq reported that Iran used Basij soldiers in "human waves." Actually, the Iraqis faced a wave of squads, each assigned a single objective, such as a machine-gun nest, on the battlefield. Simple, specific missions are a reflection of the Basij personnel's low education level. Once a squad accomplishes its mission, it

normally waits at its objective for further orders. Basij militiamen have been effective against Iraq, and the Basij militia's organization makes it a good force for hit-and-run attacks and for infiltration behind Soviet lines. []

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Initially in the Iran-Iraq war, Basij recruits received as little as two weeks' basic infantry training before being committed to combat. Since late 1984, however, Iran has tried to create better disciplined and more tightly controlled Basij units. More time is spent at training camps in Iran's interior, and we believe Basij soldiers receive some unit training in addition to basic infantry skills. When attached to Army and Revolutionary Guard units at the front, Basij personnel are given supplemental training, often in specialized tasks. Basij militiamen today may not be as fanatic as their predecessors, but they are still highly motivated. In 1983, Tehran claimed that over 400,000 volunteers had been trained and had served in the Iran-Iraq war. In the event of a Soviet invasion, Iran probably could mobilize 500,000 Basij soldiers needing only minimal retraining. []

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capability is limited.⁶ []
Iranian early warning radar capabilities also are poor in the north because radar sites were damaged during the revolution. []

⁶ Technically the treaty has not been abrogated, nor has Iran, which is much more concerned about deploying its troops to fight Iraq, violated it by garrisoning regular forces close to the Soviet border. If Iraq were no longer a threat, however, we judge that Iran would move forces into the zone. []

Iranian Response to a Surprise Attack

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With little warning of an invasion, we judge that Soviet forces could push well beyond the border before a substantial Iranian military force could respond. []

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[] the Shah's military planners believed that Soviet forces could advance to the Zagros Mountains in three days if the attack were a complete surprise. Against fully mobilized Iranian forces, they estimated that it would take them as long as 10 days to go the same distance.⁷ []

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⁷ The Shah's Army totaled some 270,000 men in 1979, considerably fewer than Tehran currently can muster, counting irregular forces. []

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Figure 4. Iranian parade through Tehran's streets in demonstration of continuing public support for the nation's war against Iraq. Similarly strong national fervor and even fanaticism would sustain Iranian resistance if the Soviets were to invade. [redacted]

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Iranian regular military units garrisoned in the north are insufficient to stop the Soviets (see foldout at the end of the report). If Iran were still fighting Iraq, we estimate that in the northwest only about two divisions of Army troops with supporting artillery and several battalions of Qods (regular forces) reservists—probably a total of no more than 25,000 to 30,000 troops—would be available within two days. In the northeast, Iran has less than one Army division to defend against Soviet troops invading from the directions of Kizyl-Arvat and Ashkhabad. After the war with Iraq ends, we believe Tehran will return to garrisoning no more than three understrength Army divisions in the Kurdistan and Azerbaijan regions and another in the east.⁸ [redacted]

Because so few regular units are available in the north, Iran probably would turn to its irregular forces—currently the Gendarmerie, the Basij militia, and the Revolutionary Guard—as a first line of defense. We believe these forces could use their light arms to conduct delaying operations against the Soviets. [redacted]

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the Revolutionary Guard has organized and armed Basij units in major towns and villages in the north. Moreover, we believe Tehran could probably count on a large number of untrained volunteers in the event of a Soviet attack. [redacted]

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⁸ Iran had three Army divisions in the northwest and elements of two more divisions scattered along the eastern border before the war with Iraq. [redacted]

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Figure 5. Iranian volunteers assembled at a training garrison before leaving for the Iraqi front. If the Soviets invade, Tehran would count on facilities like this one that are located throughout the country to speed the mobilization of volunteers. [redacted]

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Iranian Response With Limited Warning

Several weeks' warning of Soviet intentions to cross the border would significantly improve Iran's ability to prepare. Nationalism and religious fanaticism, as demonstrated in the Iran-Iraq war, most likely would aid Tehran's efforts to gather a large defensive force. In a countrywide appeal, Iran probably could count on close to 1 million regular, irregular, and reserve forces to fight the Soviets, assuming that it agreed to a cease-fire with Iraq. [redacted] in 1985 Iran had at least 10 million men of military age—between 15 and 49 years old. The UN projects that the number will increase to about 12 million by 1990. [redacted] as of January 1986, the government had some 15,000 Basij registration points nationwide—including local mosques—to speed mobilization. Large transportation depots and logistic bases at Jolfa, Qazvin, Tehran, and Mashhad

would facilitate efforts to supply irregular forces and volunteers and to move them to the north. Tehran also would use all available transportation, including commercial trucks, trailers, and civilian vehicles. Iran probably could transfer several brigade-size units with light equipment from the central front to the north within two weeks after receiving warning of an impending Soviet attack. It would be reluctant to move entire Army divisions from the Iraq border, however, until Baghdad's intentions were clear. [redacted]

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Iranian Air Force Capabilities

The Iranian Air Force has only about 50 marginally operational fighters remaining in its inventory and would be no match for the Soviets, who would

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Table 3
Manpower of Iranian Forces*Thousand persons*

	Number
Total	At least 990
Regular forces	340-360
Army	235
Air Force	50
Navy	15
Qods (regular reserves)	40-60
Irregular forces	At least 650
Revolutionary Guard	At least 150
Basij	At least 500-1,000

Note: Figures include only manpower of forces on active duty.

immediately achieve air superiority over Iran. Tehran probably would try to redeploy surviving aircraft to airbases in the south. It would then conduct at least visual reconnaissance flights and perhaps isolated raids to harass the Soviets as they advanced. Iran might also consider using volunteers to fly suicide missions against Soviet troop concentrations and convoys.

Iranian ground-based air defenses, which have proved ineffective against Iraqi airstrikes, probably would not pose a serious threat to Soviet aircraft. Most of Iran's few radars are positioned to provide overlapping coverage of the western border and the Gulf coast, leaving the interior of the country with weak detection capabilities. Moreover, breakdowns and malfunctions aggravated by shortages of spare parts and experienced repair personnel frequently cause serious gaps in coverage.

Iran relies on small-to-medium-caliber antiaircraft artillery to protect its forces, to supplement its missile air defenses at large installations, and to protect

Table 4
Operational Equipment of Iranian Forces

	Number
Combat aircraft	50
Artillery (over 100 mm)	500-1,000
Armored vehicles	500-700
Antiaircraft artillery	1,000-1,500

smaller facilities throughout the country. These guns probably would pose the most serious threat to Soviet aircraft. Iran suffers from a shortage of surface-to-air missiles, especially for medium-to-high-altitude air defense. Its HAWK systems, for example, have not been a significant threat to Iraqi aircraft, because the Iranians have too few of the systems and cannot effectively maintain and use them. The Iranians may have similar difficulties operating SA-2 systems that they recently acquired from Libya and China, and the Soviets could adopt countermeasures that would make the system ineffective even if the Iranians became proficient in its use.

Ability To Defend the Coast

We believe that, like the Shah's armed forces, the current Iranian regime has contingency plans for defending its ports.

the US raid on Libya has led to increased Iranian planning for stopping amphibious attacks inside the Persian Gulf. the Iranian Sea Coast Command, which is headquartered in Bandar-e Abbas, is responsible for coastal defense. If the Soviets were to attempt an amphibious landing, the Sea Coast Command would be given full control of all Navy, Air Force, Army, and possibly Revolutionary Guard forces in the area to repel the attack. We believe that Iran's ground and marine forces would

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put up fierce resistance. The Iranians might try to use the coastal defense cruise missiles [redacted]

[redacted] they recently acquired from China against amphibious assault forces. Nonetheless, because its Navy is small and in poor repair, Tehran might count on long Soviet lines of support as its greatest defense. [redacted]

Strategy and Tactics

Iran's forces, as the Shah's Army had planned, probably would attempt to stall an invasion by blocking Soviet routes into the country and using choke points to delay their advance. Although the Iran-USSR border extends more than 1,600 kilometers, we believe

that Soviet forces could use fewer than a dozen roads to enter Iran, including those from Ashkhabad, Kizyl-Arvat, Yerevan, and Baku. Rugged terrain in northern Iran would prevent or limit most off-road maneuvering by Soviet tracked and wheeled vehicles.

Iranian forces could close key passes into the country by causing landslides and blowing up tunnels and bridges along Soviet routes. For example, between Jolfa and Tabriz, the Soviets would have to cross at least six large bridges. If the Iranians destroyed them, the Soviets might be delayed for days while they constructed replacement bridges or brought in additional crossing equipment.⁹ [redacted]

⁹ If the invasion occurred during a dry season, the Soviets could use earthmoving equipment to build up areas to enable their forces to ford the rivers and streams. [redacted]

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We believe that the Iranians would use hundreds of similar choke points along likely advance routes to further delay the Soviets. Tehran would rely in part on its military engineers—they have quickly and successfully thrown up berms; built roads, bridges, and canals; and created water barriers in the Iran-Iraq war—to help construct or use natural obstacles to impede the Soviet advance. []

[] there are close to 200 medium-to-large-size choke points—bridges, tunnels, or passes—on major Iranian roads alone. In some areas the Iranians probably would try to halt the Soviet advance by flooding roads. They might, for example, destroy aqueducts along roads from the Caspian Sea. In addition, many of the roads that the Soviets would have to use are only 6 to 7 meters wide with narrow shoulders. The Iranians would attempt to halt armored columns by destroying the lead elements, blocking roads, and forcing the rest of the column to wait until the damage was cleared. Meanwhile, the Iranians probably would conduct hit-and-run attacks against Soviet units stalled between choke points. []

Iran also would try to prevent the Soviets from using the country's 5,000-kilometer rail system by attacking bridges, yards, and tunnels. Iranian forces might destroy the rail hub and storage areas near Jolfa, where the Soviets would have to transload their cargoes because of differences between the Iranian and Soviet rail gauges. []

The Iranians probably would try to destroy any of the country's infrastructure the Soviets could use during or after an invasion. They would expand on defense plans developed during the Shah's rule that, [] [] called for irregular units to use scorched earth tactics in some areas. Tehran might even order its forces to destroy oil, communications, and power facilities to prevent the Soviets from capturing them intact. Although Tehran might try to defend some airfields, it probably would order its forces to damage or destroy most of them to prevent the Soviets from using the strips for aerial resupply.¹⁰

¹⁰ Iran has 127 usable airstrips, paved and dirt, of at least 600 meters. Forty-eight of these have runways of over 2,000 meters, and about 20 are over 3,000 meters. Ten of Iran's airfields are used strictly for military purposes, and 10 more are shared jointly between the military and civilian airlines. []

Such actions could be carried out quickly by Iranian regular or irregular forces, especially before an invasion. []

The Iranians could not win and would suffer heavy casualties in sustained conventional operations against the Soviets.¹¹ Even so, Tehran might be willing to accept high losses if it believed its forces could halt the Soviets or delay them long enough for units in other areas to build up their defenses. For example, when Iraq invaded Iran in 1980, some Iranian Army units dug in and fought fiercely to prevent the Iraqis from advancing farther while Tehran mobilized more men. Because they could not match Soviet firepower and armor, the Iranians would use tactics that minimized Soviet equipment advantages by fighting in rough terrain, for example, or at night (the Iranians have become adept at using darkness during the Iran-Iraq war). They might also try to circumvent superior Soviet airpower by attacking in bad weather whenever possible. Moreover, we believe that the Iranians would try to exploit climatic extremes—dust or snowstorms, for example—as cover for attacks. []

Iran probably would attempt to organize a large-scale guerrilla campaign behind Soviet lines. Most of Iran's experience in unconventional warfare has come from its efforts to conduct counterinsurgency operations against the Kurds in the north. Tehran, however, might be able to extrapolate from that experience the key elements necessary for an effective guerrilla campaign against the Soviets. Moreover, Iran publicly announced the formation of a Revolutionary Guard Corps headquarters for guerrilla warfare this spring; it will train troops for commando-type operations against Iraq. If the Soviets invaded, these forces, supported by civilians, would seek to prevent the Soviets from consolidating territory. Guerrilla forces would also try to hinder resupply efforts, conducting hit-and-run attacks on supply convoys to destroy or capture supplies and ammunition. []

¹¹ The Soviets would attempt to use their air and superior ground-based fire-support weapons to prevent the Iranians from moving or concentrating troops for massed attacks and from occupying fixed positions. []

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Table 5
Estimated Populations of
Iranian Cities

Thousand persons

	Population ^a
Abadan	351
Ahvaz	Over 1,000 ^b
Arak	163
Ardebil	219
Borujerd	143
Dezful	143
Esfahan	2,000 ^b
Hamadan	199
Karaj	1,500 ^b
Kerman	202
Bakhtaran	406
Khorramabad	150
Khorramshahr	212
Mashhad	Over 2,000 ^b
Orumiyeh	225
Qazvin	198
Qom	374
Rasht	233
Shiraz	Over 1,000 ^b
Tabriz	Over 2,000 ^b
Tajrish	789
Tehran	8,000-9,000 ^b

Note: Cities are those that Soviet forces may have to overcome or invest before reaching the Persian Gulf.

^a 1984 figures unless otherwise noted.

^b 1986 figure.

The Iranians most likely would fight a war of attrition, forcing the Soviets to take or invest each village, town, and city to prevent rear and flank attacks. Given Iran's terrain and the proximity of most villages to major roads, we believe the Soviets could not bypass many populated areas. For example, along one of the probable Soviet march routes—Astara to Bandar-e Anzali—there are some 65 villages within 5 kilometers of the road. In the area between the border and the 36th parallel, the Soviets would have to seize or invest at least six cities of over 200,000 people if

they advanced along the established road network.

[] the Iranians would implement civil defense plans that may include arming civilians and blocking transit routes. When Iraq took Khorramshahr in 1980, it faced fierce street fighting and suffered high casualties. We judge that the Soviets would face similarly stiff resistance in populated areas along their advance routes. []

We do not believe Soviet forces could easily isolate Tehran. The Soviets probably would have to deploy about two divisions to invest the city, and they would need considerable time and would sustain significant casualties if they attempted to take Tehran. We believe the regime would try to close off roads into the capital and arm some of the city's 8 to 9 million residents from Army and Revolutionary Guard arsenals in the area as part of its civil defense measures.

Foreign Assistance

We believe Iran would have serious difficulty acquiring large amounts of military materiel from foreign suppliers soon enough to help it during the opening stages of a Soviet invasion. Moreover, once materiel reached the country, the Iranians would have difficulty transporting it quickly to where it would be needed. Iranian units have suffered logistic problems throughout the Iran-Iraq war, and these would be more complicated during a Soviet invasion. Soviet air supremacy would seriously hinder Iranian aerial resupply. To support the fighting, most military materiel probably would have to enter by way of the coast or across the Pakistani border and be moved long distances at night.¹² []

Under strong Soviet pressure, Tehran would not be particular in seeking arms assistance, although it would guard against becoming dependent on a single

¹² Even though Iran would have fewer forces stationed along the Gulf than in the west and north, the Soviets still would have difficulty closing off all ports quickly. The Soviets, however, could attempt to damage the ports with airstrikes. The Soviet Navy would probably plan to fight the US Navy before reaching Iran's ports.

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Iraqi Response to a Soviet Invasion of Iran

The Iraqis would greet a Soviet invasion of Iran with a mixture of joy and alarm. They would welcome the development because it would probably force Iran to end the Iran-Iraq war. The Iraqis, however, would worry that the Soviets also had designs on Iraq. As Soviet intentions in Iran became clearer and the Iraqis experienced relief on the battlefield, concerns over the Soviets would increase. Iraqi mistrust of the Soviets is deep and stems from continuing Soviet support for the Communist Party of Iraq, the invasion of Afghanistan, Soviet activities in Ethiopia and South Yemen, and Moscow's cutoff of arms to Iraq during the Kurdish rebellion in the mid-1970s and early in the Iran-Iraq war. []

If Iran held out against the Soviets, the Iraqis would benefit from Iran's preoccupation with defending its northern borders. Iraq, however, has long worried that a weakened Iran would fragment and that political instability would spill across the border, particularly in the Kurdish regions. If the Soviets remained in Iran, the Iraqis would be even more troubled because Baghdad would see the emergence of a Soviet-dominated Communist state on its flank as threatening. []

Despite Iraq's dependence on the USSR for 90 percent of its arms supplies, Baghdad probably would publicly condemn the invasion. The ideology of the ruling Ba'thist Party in Iraq is highly anti-imperialist, and the leadership would feel strong pressure

from the party and the Arab world in general to take a strong stand against the Soviet move in the hope of containing the Soviets in Iran. []

Baghdad would avoid military clashes with the Soviets and would be reluctant to draw down its military equipment and ammunition stockpiles to aid Tehran. The war with Iran has been costly—over 400,000 Iraqi casualties—and Iraq would not want to be drawn into a battle with its principal arms supplier. It similarly would not allow the movement of foreign military aid through its territory to Iran but probably would permit the passage of humanitarian and economic relief. []

If the Iran-Iraq war were still going on when the Soviets invaded, Iraq most likely would try to take advantage of Iran's predicament to press its maximum demands for a peace settlement. Iraq is eager to stop the bloodletting and would believe that Iran had little option but to end the conflict on Iraq's terms. Among these conditions are recognition of Iraqi control of the Shatt al Arab, the return of Iraqi prisoners of war, the withdrawal of Iranian forces from Iraq, cessation of Iran's claims for indemnities and for condemnation of Iraq as the aggressor, and a signed peace treaty providing for noninterference in the internal affairs of Iraq and the other Arab Gulf states. []

supplier. Many of its current suppliers have ties to the Soviets—including Eastern Europe, Libya, and Syria—and Iran could not count on their support if the Soviets invaded. It would continue to order supplies from China and North Korea and turn more toward the West. Tehran would be suspicious of US offers of arms assistance, but, if desperate enough, it probably would accept even direct materiel support.

Prospects for Iran

We believe that a Soviet invasion force that encountered only Iranian resistance could achieve its objective of occupying Iran. We estimate that the Soviets would need at least three weeks to reach the Persian Gulf. They also would need to commit 300,000 to 500,000 troops to carry out the campaign and occupy the country. Nonetheless, we believe that the Iranians

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could prevent Moscow from consolidating its control over the country for many years by concentrating on unconventional and urban warfare. []

A Soviet invasion might not immediately topple the Islamic regime and would galvanize Iranian national resistance against the USSR. Iranians would almost universally oppose Soviet efforts to establish a Communist regime under Tudeh Party auspices. Moreover, even if the central government eventually fell, we would not envision any alternative government favoring Soviet rule. Iranians probably would rally to the leadership of local clergy and continue their opposition. []

In consolidating their control over the country, the Soviets would have to contend with a resistance that would be much larger and probably more effective than the one they face in Afghanistan. Unlike the Afghan military, the Iranian armed forces would view their government as willing to support opposition to the Soviets and would be loyal to it in a national emergency. The armed forces also are more numerous and better armed than the Afghan military or insurgents were in 1979, and they have combat experience earned in the Iran-Iraq war. Nationalism is much more firmly rooted in Iran than in Afghanistan, and the "revolutionary" regime has achieved a degree of institutionalization that Kabul still has not attained. Moreover, religion appears to be a stronger motivator in Iran, where hundreds of thousands have eagerly sought martyrdom. []

The Iranians could probably continue a guerrilla war against the Soviets for years with outside arms assistance and a functioning internal supply network. Without foreign military aid, armed opposition would probably diminish over time. We believe Tehran has established small arms caches throughout the country—for example, at Revolutionary Guard and Basij training areas and Gendarmerie posts—that it currently uses to support the war. These supplies could be tapped during an invasion to arm guerrilla forces. The Iranians also would try to capture or steal military supplies from the Soviets. []

Implications for the United States

Strong Iranian resistance to a Soviet invasion would slow a Soviet advance to the Persian Gulf. An attempt to consolidate control over Iran would require considerable time and perhaps cause the Soviets to put off planning a push beyond Iran. Moreover, because the Soviets would have to leave substantial forces in Iran to maintain control, they would have to reinforce their troops—a move the United States would probably detect—to continue an advance against the Gulf states. []

The longer the Iranians delay a Soviet advance, the greater the chances that the United States would be able to convince the Gulf states to allow Washington access to their military facilities. A slow Soviet advance also would give the United States time to move more forces and equipment to the region if it decided to assist the Gulf states. []

Iran's needs would be great enough to make it receptive to US offers of military materiel, but we believe it would prefer that arms be shipped through third countries. Even under such circumstances, Tehran probably would remain adamantly opposed to reconciliation with the United States and would balk if the United States tried to make arms deliveries contingent on Iran moderating its political aims. []

Most Iranians would oppose US military intervention during a Soviet invasion. They would interpret such US involvement in the conflict as evidence of what Iranian leaders refer to as a "plot by the superpowers against the Islamic revolution." Even if US forces delayed entering the country for as long as two to four weeks after the Soviets, Iran would see US efforts as an attempt to take advantage of its weakened state and would try to fight a multifront war. []

If the United States intervened, Iran would move fewer of its troops northward and would try to force the United States to engage in a war of attrition

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against Iranian resistance. Iranian units would fight fiercely to defend Persian Gulf ports and, as against the Soviets in the north, attack the US military along its route of advance. Moreover, Tehran could count on many volunteers and civilians in the south to oppose a landing of US military forces. [REDACTED]

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If US ground forces were not directly involved and Washington limited its support to airdropping military supplies and blocking Iranian ports to prevent Soviet amphibious assaults, Tehran would react cautiously. It would welcome US military supplies and a possible respite from having to undertake a strong defense of its Persian Gulf ports. Nonetheless, Tehran would be suspicious of US motives, fearing that Washington might try to take advantage of Iran's weakness. Iranian forces might still be ordered to prepare coastal defenses to oppose a possible landing of US forces if Tehran interpreted US intentions as changing to Iran's detriment. [REDACTED]

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